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ON-FILE NSC RELEASE  
INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

SUBJECT: Plan for Ground Action Against Base Areas  
in Cambodia

FROM: General Abrams, COMUSMACV

DATE: 30 March 1970

ARMY review  
completed.

This message is in four parts, as follows:

Part I - General. Provides a mission statement; overall assumptions; a summary of the options, risks and impacts; an estimate of the likelihood of success; a proposed public affairs policy; conclusions; and recommendations.

Part II - Option 1. Provides the plan for an attack on Base Area 352/353, Central Office South Vietnam Headquarters (COSVN HQ).

Part III - Option 2. Provides the plan for an attack on Base Areas 704 and 367/706.

Part IV - Answers questions not covered in full elsewhere.

Part I - General.

1. Mission. MACV in coordination with the forces of GVN attacks and destroys North Vietnamese/VC logistics sanctuaries along the South Vietnamese/Cambodian border.

2. Assumptions.

a. There is to be coordination and cooperation between Cambodian Government (FARK) and US/GVN forces.

b. Relief from present restrictions on B-52 and TACAIR sorties will be granted as necessary.

c. Appropriate changes to rules of engagement will be made.

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3. Summary of Options.

a. The first option chooses to attain maximum results in an attack into Base Area 352/353. Enemy forces in the area are large supply storage areas and headquarters elements of COSVN, plus at least one division headquarters and six regimental headquarters. Attacks into the area will require a multi-division effort by elements of the 1st Cav Div and ARVN Airborne Div and controlled by Hq 1st CavDiv. The scheme of maneuver consists of an initial attack by a two-brigade force to destroy COSVN or other headquarters elements, and follow-on attacks by additional forces as required. This operation would be supported by B-52 as well as conventional fire support and could last as long as four weeks depending on the sort of targets uncovered.

b. In second option simultaneous attacks are planned against Base Areas 704 and 367/706. Base Area 704 is a major storage area and transshipment point and Base Area 367/706 contains extensive logistics bases and subregional type headquarters. Attack into Base Area 704 is to be accomplished by the 4th Armored Brigade (ARVN) under the control of the 44th Strategic Tactical Zone. Attack of Base Area 367/706 is to be executed by three brigade-size forces in a combined airmobile and ground penetration of enemy positions. This operation is expected to last about 14 days.

c. Coordination with Joint General Staff (JGS) revealed a desire on their part to support Option 2 with, (1) an attack by one or two brigades from the 9th Inf Div (ARVN) to destroy rear elements of the 88th NVA Div near the western edge of the Parrot's Beak (WT 9000) and, (2) an attack into rear areas north of Base Area 706 by reserve forces of III CTZ if they are not committed south of that base area. Both of these alternatives are under consideration but not further discussed in this message.

d. The concepts of employment of friendly forces will require modifications both to accommodate refinements in planning and the situation existing in RVN at the time these plans might be executed.

4. Comparison of Options.

a. Option 1 has two major advantages over Option 2. These are: (1) potential for destruction of the major enemy Command and

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Control Headquarters (COSVN) and (2) little danger of noncombatant casualties. Most significantly, however, Option 1 risks higher US/RVNAF casualties than does Option 2.

b. Option 2 has more, but somewhat less significant, advantages over Option 1. These include (1) greater RVNAF participation and visibility, (2) shorter duration, (3) more favorable (open) terrain, and (4) probability of fewer US/RVNAF casualties. Most significantly, however, this option risks higher noncombatant casualties than does Option 1.

5. Risks.

a. Noncombatant casualties. There is a significant risk that there would be noncombatant casualties, particularly under Option 2 in Base Areas 706/367. Such risk is minimum under Option 1. The degree to which noncombatant casualties could be controlled would depend heavily on the degree of cooperation of Cambodian officials and their ability to control the population. Unless controlled, there is a high probability that the news media would make this a major issue.

b. Vietnamization.

(1) The principal risk attached to this plan is the possibility that its execution would trigger an all-out enemy effort against I CTZ; although it is doubted that he would openly launch a major attack directly across the DMZ.

(2) A lesser risk lies in the potential enemy reaction of a general attack on the SVN population. Such an attack, however limited, would have some visibility but its practical effect would probably not amount to much.

(3) US redeployments have reduced significantly MACV's flexibility to reinforce or fill gaps, and the foregoing enemy reactions could require curtailment of operations under this plan.

6. Impacts.

a. Execution of this plan to carry the war to the enemy would have a highly favorable impact on RVNAF/GVN morale and confidence, and hence on Vietnamization.

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b. Destruction of major base areas and facilities adjacent to III and IV CTZ would significantly reduce the threat to those zones and could have a salutary effect on free world and GVN programs.

c. There would be incremental costs which, if defrayed at the expense of Vietnamization programs, could have an adverse impact thereon. If, however, the operation is successful in its ultimate aim, the long-term impact should be favorable and more than offsetting.

d. The impact of this plan on US troop withdrawals stems primarily from the risk of enemy counteraction in I CTZ. Limitation on in-country capability to reinforce I CTZ militate strongly against any US redeployments beyond those now scheduled by 15 April.

e. Execution of this plan in itself should have minimum impact on population security in South Vietnam. Enemy actions in I CTZ could bring setbacks to security in that zone and in areas from which any required reinforcements would be withdrawn. Similarly, enemy counteractions aimed directly at the general population could bring some setbacks.

7. Estimate of Success.

a. Weather is important to success of attacks under either option. March and April are the most favorable months; after April, time runs out.

b. The attacks under either option will have a significant impact on an NVA/VC attack on Phnom Penh. Disruption of command and control elements, destruction of logistical installations and tying units to the defense of the bases under attack, and of other bases vulnerable to attack, could severely degrade the momentum of the enemy attack. There are, however, other factors to be considered. The tenuous situation in Cambodia currently reflects factors of attitude and political orientation which can change rapidly; a major communist psychological campaign is in progress to maintain, at least, a highly unsettled and disoriented political situation.

c. In sum, from a military viewpoint, it appears that the probability of success would justify execution of either option under this plan and that the plan should be executed in April due to weather conditions.

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However, whether or not the NVA/VC would succeed in an attack on Phnom Penh rests to a greater degree on political factors at work in Cambodia.

8. Public Affairs. MACV should brief Bureau Chiefs in Saigon on an embargoed basis 24 to 36 hours prior to the execution date. In the event of a leak, the briefing should be held immediately and the operation embargoed to preclude publication of any information until released by MACV. Bureaus should also be invited to dispatch correspondents to the field. Arrangements for press coverage should also be coordinated with the RVNAF.

9. Conclusions. It is concluded that:

a. The success to be achieved in relieving Communist pressure on Phnom Penh will be influenced importantly by political factors at work in Cambodia.

b. The choice between Option 1 and 2 turns primarily on the issues of US/RVNAF and noncombatant casualties and on the situation in RVN at the time the plan is executed.

c. In light of the potential benefits to be gained from execution of this plan, the risks are acceptable if US force levels are not further reduced below the level to be reached on 15 April.

d. For reasons of weather, the plan should be executed during April.

10. Recommendations. It is recommended that:

a. Option 1, which would minimize noncombatant casualties, be executed as soon as possible after intelligence indicates a high probability of NVA/VC attack on Phnom Penh.

b. Further US redeployments after 15 April be held in abeyance pending developments over the next 75-90 days.

c. The public affairs policy outlined in paragraph 8, above, be followed.

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Part II. Option 1 - Attack on Base Areas 352/353 (COSVC Hqs)

1. Intelligence. (See Supplementary Information, for detailed intelligence.)

a. Due to constant shifting of enemy forces and installations, Base Area 353 was added to this option. The Base Area 352/353 is a large complex of troop and logistical facilities, ammunition storage areas, hospitals, POW camps, and command and control headquarters. These base areas are the primary staging areas for enemy units operating in War Zone C and Binh Long Province, RVN.

b. The area is well protected, with an estimated strength of 4,000. Known units in the area are COSVN: Hqs 9th VC Division and its subordinate regiments, the 95C, 271st and 272D; the 65th NVA Regiment of the 7th NVA Division; Hq, 65th Arty Cmd; and the 96th Arty Regt.

2. Command and Control. This operation will be under the control of CG, 1st Air Cavalry Division (AM).

3. Task Organization.

a. 1st Cav Div; 3-BDE

b. ARVN ABN DIV (-); 2BDE

c. 11th ARMD CAV REGT (-); 2 ARMD CAV SQDN.

4. Concept.

a. This operation will be conducted in two phases. For Phase 1 a combined two-brigade force of approximately nine battalions (4 (US) Inf, 3 (RVN) Inf, 2 ARMD Cav Sqdn) will attack the objective area to find, fix and destroy enemy forces. After contact is established a determination will be made to commit additional forces based on the worth of the results attained. Phase 2 commences upon reinforcement or exploitation of initial successes. The operation can be initiated within 72 hours of receipt of order to execute.

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b. The objective will be to destroy COSVN and troop and logistics facilities. Enemy elements in Base Areas 352/353 constantly shift and move to avoid detection. Therefore, all intelligence gathering means will be intensified to obtain accurate locations, and specific objectives selected about 72 hours before launching the attack.

c. Should the situation develop rapidly, the remainder of the two divisions are to be employed to achieve decisive results. Areas vacated by 1st Cav or Airborne Division units will be covered by 5th ARVN Division units or Ranger battalions.

5. Supporting Fires. Preparatory B-52 strikes in selected areas. Operation will be supported by TacAir, Artillery and Helicopter Gunships.

6. Coordination. There are no FARK units in the southern halves of each base area. Cambodian civilians will not be notified until D-Day.

7. Duration of Operation. The operation will require 3 to 4 weeks.

8. Logistic Support. The logistic system is in and functioning. Commitment of entire force will affect other operations in III CTZ.

Part III. Option 2 - Attack on Base Area 704 and 367/706.

Section A - General: Option 2 is a simultaneous, or nearly so, attack on Base Area 704 and 367/706. These operations will be essentially independent of each other and will be ARVN heavy with US providing some ground combat troops and the bulk of the air, artillery and helicopter support.

Section B - Base Area 704.

1. Intelligence.

a. Base Area 704 contains troop cantonments, medical and logistic facilities, and headquarters elements. It is the primary staging area for enemy units entering the Delta. It has facilities for training, refitting and resting enemy troops. Noncombatant civilian population is light.

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b. The following military units are in the area: 295th Main Force Battalion, 511th and 512th Local Force Battalions, and a detached element of the Hq 1st NVA Division. Estimated strength is about 1000.

2. Command and Control. The 44th STZ will control and coordinate this operation.

3. Task Organization.

a. 4th ARVN Armored Brigade: 2 Armored Cavalry Sqds, 2 Ranger Bns.

b. 4th ARVN Ranger Gp: 2 Ranger Bns, 1 Armored Cavalry Troop (Reserve).

c. USN/VNN: River Craft and Fire Support.

4. Concept. The operation is to be in three phases.

a. In Phase I the 4th Armored Brigade attacks north from Tan Chau along the east bank of the Mekong River to seize transshipment points about four kilometers north of the border. USN and VNN river forces will conduct patrol on rivers and canals contiguous to 4th Armored Brigade axes of advance to the limits of penetration by the attacking ground elements.

b. Phase II will be a retrograde operation, in order to return friendly elements to assembly areas in the vicinity of Tan Chau. Subsequent movement of forces will be by river craft over interconnecting rivers and canals to attack positions in the vicinity of An Phu.

c. In Phase III, the 4th Armored Brigade attacks north between the Chau Doc and Bassac Rivers to seize logistics facilities approximately six kilometers north of the border. USN and VNN river forces will conduct patrol operations on the Chau Doc and Bassac Rivers to the depth of penetration of attacking ground elements.

d. Operation can be initiated within 72 hours.

5. Supporting Fires. Generally there will be no preparatory fires to avoid unnecessary casualties to noncombatant civilians. The

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operation will be supported by TacAir, Artillery and Helicopter Gunships.

6. Coordination. Coordination will be effected at local (district) level with Cambodians to assure no conflict of involvement with FARK units, and to minimize casualties to noncombatant civilian population.

7. Duration. The operation will require 12-14 days.

8. Logistic Support. Logistic systems are established and functioning. There are no logistic constraints visualized.

Section C - Base Area 367/706.

1. Intelligence. (See Supplementary Information, for detailed intelligence.)

a. Base Area 706/367 is a complex for troop housing, logistics facilities, hospitals, and training sites, and a command and control center headquarters. Density of civilian noncombatant population is high.

b. The area is strongly fortified with an estimated strength of 5000. Known enemy units in the area are Hqs Sub-Region 3, element of Sub-Region 6, Sub-Region 2 and Rear Service Group 1000.

2. Command Control. The operation will be under the command of Hq, III CTZ (Lt General Tri).

3. Task Organization.

a. 49th ARVN Regiment: 3 Inf Bns, 1 Armored Cav Regt and 1 Air Cav Troop (US).

b. Task Force 333 (Hq, 3d ARVN Ranger Gp): 2 Ranger Bns, 1 Mech Inf Bn (US), 1 Inf Bn (US), 1 Inf Bn (ARVN), 2 Armored Personnel Carrier Troops.

c. 3d Brigade, 25th Inf Div (US): 3 Inf/Mech Inf Bns.

d. Task Force 318 (ARVN): 1 Armored Cav Sqdn (US), 1 Inf Bn (ARVN) and 2 Armored Personnel Carrier Troops.

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4. Concept. The operation will be divided into three phases. Phase 1 will consist of a combined helicopter and mechanized assault into Base Area 367 by the 49th ARVN REGiment. The 3d Brigade, 25th Inf Div (US) will provide 3 Battalions as blocking forces. Phase 2 will be a coordinated ground assault into Base Area 706 by Task Force 318. Phase 3 will be an assault by Task Force 333 through Base Area 706 and then to the north. The operation can be initiated within 72 hours of receipt of order to execute.

5. Supporting Fires. Generally no preparatory fires are planned in order to avoid unnecessary casualties to noncombatant civilian population. Operation will be supported by Tac Air, Artillery and Helicopter gunships.

6. Coordination will be conducted at local level with Cambodians to assure no involvement with FARK units and to minimize casualties to noncombatant civilian population. The ability to coordinate with the Cambodians is tenuous and subject to rapid variation.

7. Duration of Operation. The operation will require 10-14 days.

8. Logistic Support. Logistic system is in and functioning. There are no logistic constraints visualized.

Part IV - Answers to Questions.

1. Q: What intelligence do we have and how good is intelligence concerning the enemy base camps and sanctuary locations?

Answer: The intelligence on which this plan is based is considered relatively good and adequate to support the conclusions and recommendations. As planning progresses there will be a need for current aerial photography and updated combat intelligence.

2. Q: What size friendly forces are contemplated?

Answer: See Parts II and III, above. In general, the size of the forces planned has been designed to provide adequate combat power in the objective area to ensure success while maintaining a reserve to

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enhance flexibility for exploitation of any unforeseen advantage or to respond decisively to local enemy counter-action. Division-level Reserve Forces would continue security operations in assigned Areas of Operation, but would be prepared for rapid commitment on order.

3. Q: What would be the extent of the US involvement, i.e., how much air effort, ground effort, and geographical incursion would be indicated?

Answer: See Parts II and III, above. Emphasis would be on combined operations; however, significant US involvement is considered essential to ensure success. Option 1, while combined, would involve a preponderance of US involvement, including B-52 strikes in preparation and support. In those ground operations to be conducted primarily by ARVN, i.e., under Option 2, attack against Base Area 704, US Helicopter Naval and Air support will be substantial. Nevertheless, every effort will be made to credit success to RVNAF, since such success could have a favorable psychological impact of highest consequence for RVNAF and for the people and Government of SVN. Geographical incursion by maneuver units should generally not be required to exceed between 10 and 15 kilometers; however, counterfires might extend beyond that depth as might ground maneuver to exploit success or to destroy key enemy resources in the course of the operation.

4. Q: What would be the duration proposed for the operations?

Answer: See Parts II and III, above. The duration proposed for the operations is that considered necessary to cause sufficient disruption of enemy "rear" areas to reduce the weight of his attack on Phnom Penh. The anticipated time required is varied primarily by the nature of the terrain and vegetation in the objective areas. The concept of short duration raid type operations has been considered and discarded, since the impact of such operations would be limited and of doubtful remuneration. On the other hand, while the proposed plans envision operations lasting from 14 days in Base Areas 704 and 367/706 to 26 days in Base Areas 352/353, flexibility should be retained to remain in those areas longer if indicated by the mission or by developments at the time. In sum, it is not considered advisable to fix the duration; the operations should be

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mission oriented, and the time actually required would depend heavily on the terrain and enemy reactions. As we progress into the wet season, the operations would become more difficult and time-consuming.

5. Q: What type of command and control arrangements would be required?

Answer: See Parts I and II, above. Operations envisioned are based on cooperation and coordination with RVNAF, and no change from arrangements in current use for combined US/RVNAF operations is envisioned. Basically, command and control of all ground forces would be exercised by a division level headquarters (ARVN or US) with all forces under the operational control of a single commander. In that regard the distance between Base Area 704 and Area 367/706 in Option 2 calls for separate but coordinated operations with CTZ/STZ commanders exercising control in the two areas. Cooperation and coordination with Cambodian (FARK) forces in the vicinity of the objective areas would be effected primarily through GVN contacts including direct liaison where feasible. With regard to such contacts, under Option 1 none is understood to exist and under Option 2 they are understood to be good in the vicinity of Base Area 704, but limited in the vicinity of Base Areas 367/706.

6. Q: What amount of joint planning would be required prior to implementing such a plan, i. e., planning among the US, the South Vietnamese, and/or Cambodian forces?

Answer: Setting out major framework of this plan has been accomplished at MACV/JGS level with assistance of CTZ/Field Force Commanders. Hereafter, combined planning down to division and lower levels, with updating and honing to reflect changes in the enemy and friendly situations, will be accomplished in 72 hours from receipt of the order to execute. In regard to planning with the Cambodians, the primary requirement would be to inform them of the purpose and scope of our operations; this would be done, where feasible, at the latest possible date.

7. Q: What is the incremental cost and risk attached to the proposed plan and how do the costs compare with the benefit which would be derived?

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Answer: The incremental cost cannot be quantified with any degree of exactness. There would, of course, be increased expenditures of ammunition, fuel and other supplies. A surge in air operations, including B-52 strikes, will be necessary for preparation fires and to support troops in contact. In this regard, the recent information provided MACV concerning current and projected air munitions availability indicates action is required to insure maintenance of adequate levels. Generally, the units concerned are currently engaged in operations of medium tempo and are located in the general vicinity of the proposed operations, which will tend to minimize costs associated with troop movements.

The principal risk attached to this plan is in the possibility that its execution would trigger an all-out enemy effort against I CTZ; although it is doubted that he would openly launch a major attack directly across the DMZ. US redeployments have reduced significantly our flexibility to reinforce, and such an enemy motion could require curtailment of operations under this plan.

On balance, the potential benefit to be derived from the execution of this plan is considered to outweigh the potential incremental cost and risk. Successful disruption of enemy efforts to reinstate a government in Phnom Penh favorable to their cause could in the long run offset manifold any incremental cost.

8. Q: What are the budget implications?

Answer: See discussion of incremental cost and risk, paragraph 7, preceding.

9. Q: What would be the impact on other free world operations in SVN and on the Vietnamization program assuming no additional funds or resources become available?

Answer: Execution of this plan to carry the war to the enemy would have a highly favorable impact on RVNAF/GVN morale and confidence, and hence on Vietnamization.

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The extent to which any overall incremental costs would have to be absorbed by curtailment of future free world operations and Vietnamization programs cannot be determined. If, however, the operation is successful in its ultimate aim, the long-term impact should be favorable and more than offsetting.

The impact of this plan on US troop withdrawals stems primarily from the risk of enemy counteraction in I CTZ. Limitations on capability to reinforce I CTZ from in-country militate strongly against any US redeployments beyond those scheduled by 15 April so long as the execution of this plan is considered possible.

The impact on population security in South Vietnam depends essentially on what countermeasures the enemy undertakes. Execution of the plan in itself should have minimum impact since the bulk of the units involved are now engaged in mobile operations against the enemy rather than in support of pacification. If, however, the enemy should react in force against I CTZ or elsewhere, there could be significant setbacks in security in the affected area and in areas from which reinforcements would be withdrawn. The enemy could also react with a general attack on the population; such a counter offensive would necessarily be of limited scale, but it could have adverse psychological impact and offset the favorable psychological impact expected from successful execution of this plan.

10. Q: What US, ARVN and noncombatant casualties are expected?

Answer: Although US/ARVN initiative and firepower would combine to reduce casualties, all areas contain fortified positions and can be expected to be heavily booby trapped. There would inevitably be some noncombatant casualties; however, the number would depend largely on enemy reactions and tactics. While we have a fair idea of noncombatant concentrations, some Cambodians will undoubtedly be mixed up with the NVA/VC forces.

In regard to military casualties, considering a scale of high, medium and low intensity combat, these two operations would fall into the high intensity category. Accordingly, military casualties could be

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expected to fall into the upper range for US forces and RVNAF. With respect to noncombatant casualties, those to be expected under Option 1 are negligible. Under Option 2 the presence of civilian population in the projected area of operations makes the risk of substantial noncombatant casualties high.

Additionally, loss of some tactical aircraft should be anticipated.

11. Q: What time is needed by MACV to be on alert status prepared to execute the mission, but without prepositioning forces? What time is required to commence execution of plan from time of decision in Washington, including prepositioning of forces and final coordination?

Answer: MACV will require 72 hours to complete lower echelon combined planning, commence execution, including prepositioning of forces and final coordination, after receipt of the order to execute. The final 24 hours should be allowed for prepositioning of forces and final coordination. Depending on the involvement of friendly forces at the time execution of the plan is ordered an additional 24 hours might be required. Therefore, MACV would need to be on alert status for 48 hours to be prepared to execute the mission, but without prepositioning forces.

12. Q: What is the recommendation as to best public handling, assuming a decision to proceed, including level on which public affairs aspects should be handled?

Answer: Preparations for this operation will be difficult to conceal since so many individuals, both on the GVN and the US side, will have to be briefed prior to execution; therefore, as the date of the operation approaches, dangers of leaks will increase. For this reason, it would be well to brief Bureau Chiefs of the major press bureaus in Saigon on an embargoed basis 24 to 36 hours prior to the execution date. In the event of any indications of a leak, the briefing should be held immediately and the operations embargoed to preclude publication of any information until released by MACV.

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The briefing for Bureau Chiefs should be general in nature and not indicate specific objective areas, date of execution, or other specific details considered especially sensitive. However, the briefing should be sufficiently detailed to define the purpose and the general concept of operations. Bureaus should also be invited to dispatch correspondents to cover the operation, instructed that such coverage is embargoed until the embargo is lifted by MACV, and given a time and place to have correspondents report. Arrangements for press coverage should also be coordinated with RVNAF so that on-the-spot coverage of RVNAF participation is also provided.

Correspondents who report to field units to cover the operation should be briefed at a time convenient for the local commander but in no case more than 12 hours prior to the operation.

All briefing should emphasize the fact that the operation results directly from offensive military action taken by the NVA in Cambodia and the resultant increased threat to allied forces in Vietnam. The limited nature of objectives and the direct significance of activities in the objective area to the security of allied forces should receive particular emphasis.

These actions will minimize the danger of a leak prior to execution of the operation, will insure that coverage is balanced and factual rather than sensational, and will hopefully result in coverage which places events in proper perspective. While it may not be possible to preclude speculative reporting which implies a general widening of participation by US forces in Southeast Asia, it can be expected that as a result of this type of approach, responsible newsmen can be expected to more accurately present to the public a report on all aspects of the operation and its significance.

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